

A man & woman were married for many years. Whenever there was a confrontation, yelling could be heard deep into the night. The old man would shout, "When I die, I will dig my way up and out of the grave – and I will come back, and haunt you for the rest of your life!" Neighbors feared him. The old man liked the fact that he was feared. Then one evening, he died. He was 98 years old. After the burial, the widow's neighbors were concerned for her safety and asked her "Aren't you afraid that he may indeed dig his way out of the grave and haunt you for the rest of your life?" The wife said, "Let him dig. I had him buried upside down – and I know he'll NEVER ask for directions!"

These gospel texts are so rich. I don't know whether I'm still learning this much – or I've forgotten this much! But this parable is unusual because Luke tells us the point at the very beginning: "to pray always and not lose heart." Luke explains it as having to do with the delay of Jesus' return at the end of time by inserting "But when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?" at the very end. The parable is preceded by Jesus' teaching on His coming kingdom, and it ends with a reference to the coming of the Son of Man. Read in this way – as a parable about the disciples' longing for Jesus' promised triumphant return – it is a parable about persisting in hope even when that hope does not seem to be fulfilled.

The point is made with a "How much more" story – if an uncaring, unrighteous human judge will eventually give in to persistence, *how much more* will our heavenly Father grant our petitions for the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we might be more faithful disciples? And before we launch into a sermon on God's eagerness to answer our prayers, we have to note that the parable specifically says that God is eager to grant our request FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT, not necessarily all our particular requests.

This parable might have been intended to provide encouragement to discouraged believers in the early church. Perhaps they were praying for deliverance from persecution. Or they were growing tired of waiting for the return of Jesus that they had understood would be imminent. God is not some miserly judge; God will bring justice and deliverance in God's own good time. Which never seems to be our time. As Martin Luther King Jr used to say, "The arc of history is long and slow; but it always bends toward justice." As believers, we understand that God is LORD of history. But long and slow – seems to be God's way. This parable says be persistent – because if even a lousy human judge will respond to a powerless but persistent widow, how much more so will God respond to the prayers of His people?

The widow of our story is held up to us as an example. The word widow in Hebrew literally means 'one who has no voice.' She had no voice, no power, no protection. Yet she went to the judge, standing alone and without the usual support that most people would have had from their family. She has but one arrow in her quiver -- persistence. And she exercises her persistence for all it's worth. The translation we have says the judge decides to rule in her favor -- not because he cares for justice but "lest she come and strike me." The phrase in Greek is meant to be a bit of a joke. It literally says "lest she give me a black eye." And in the culture of the time that meant "lest she embarrass me in front of everyone." Remember, these were tiny towns; people would have seen her badgering the judge, and if he showed up with a black eye he wasn't going to be able to get away with telling everyone "I ran into a door." They would have known his black eye came from this powerless woman – a widow no less. "What a wimp" they'd say. He didn't want the embarrassment. (help from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Oct-Dec 2019, p. 9)

Second, there are a number of ways we could go with this text. I want to go right to the persistence angle. Why do we have to come to church every week? What do we do here? We confess our sin, ask for forgiveness, try to bend our lives to the truth of these ancient stories, and take an honest look at ourselves. These are things that don't come naturally to us. They're not easy. Who of us has a burning desire to admit to our wrongdoing and our sin? But we sin every day. And if we come back week after week, we eventually begin to deal with our sin.

Or why do we have to say the Lord's prayer every Sunday? Engaging in honest, heartfelt conversation with God is not something that we innately know how to do. What words do we say? Do we begin with petition or with praise? Maybe that's why Jesus, when His disciples asked Him, "Teach us how to pray," gave them a prayer that they could say over and over again. Eventually, if we say it over and over again, we come to know the Lord's Prayer by heart. And I've seen it pay off a lot of times over the last 40 years. When a person suffering from dementia can't remember their own children or spouse, I begin the Lord's Prayer – and they can join right along with me, and often a sense of peace and calm comes over them. That's the fruit of that persistence, that weekly, even daily prayer.

Or we hear this gospel – or the Prodigal Son – and we think "AGAIN? I've heard it a dozen times. Not again!" But invariably, when we repeat some old, old story one more time, we see new meaning in it. The story hasn't changed, but we have. We find a new doorway into the story – and see something that we missed before. Did we forget that much – or are we learning that much?!

In life itself – and in our faith life particularly – we have to keep repeating things, going over the same material, week after week, repeating the same prayers and stories – because we travel a way that few choose to walk. No one is born into faith. None of it comes naturally. Discipleship is a learned reality. It requires perseverance and persistence. That's why parents are asked to PROMISE to bring their children up in the PRACTICE of the faith when their children are baptized. The children – just like us adults – need to do this again and again and again. None of it is easy! None of this is gotten on a single go-round, we'll never get it with a Christmas & Easter drop-in. And if you're here after having dropped your children off at Faith Formation and not getting them to Mass – you're missing the whole point of their formation and your responsibility to them as a parent who promised to bring them up in the PRACTICE of our faith!

We HAVE to repeat the words of the Creed, 'I believe!' Because eventually we will doubt. We will become uncertain. We have to come right back the next week, stand up again, and say one more time, "I believe." And we need others to help us in the doing. While the gospel is good news – it is also first bad news – about the cross – and a whole lot of life is tough – it calls for an embrace of the cross – and just shouldn't be faced alone. It's not healthy for us to be alone – psychologically – and certainly not spiritually. It's why we belong to a CHURCH, a COMMUNITY.

It's persistence that overcomes our natural inclinations and moves us closer to faithful discipleship. If discipleship were easy, we could have been given a book of instructions instead of a Savior. We needed saving. We needed God. This life's too tough to go through it on our own. We need God. And we need each other. And we need to keep PRACTICING the faith. Until one day we hope to have gotten it somewhat right. I'm in my 7th decade and I'm still trying to get it right. And I need to come here every week – every DAY – and still have more yet to do. Ask the staff – ask my family – they'll all tell you Durbin STILL needs an awful lot of work!

Third, while we need persistence in our prayer, remember this gospel is about more than personal prayer – the woman is seeking justice. And the work of justice is extremely difficult. I read about a

congregation that became convicted that they needed to do something about the problem of homelessness. A man was sleeping on their church steps at night. He was brutally assaulted by an unknown assailant. The church custodian found him the next morning. They took him to the hospital, but he died.

That served as a wake-up call for the congregation. They held meetings and had a plan of action. Volunteers were recruited and secured. They began taking in people and providing a safe, caring environment for those who needed it. Things went well, for a while. The first night, 4 homeless people showed up. Then a dozen – sleeping at the church and receiving meals. Some of the homeless people in town left the city homeless shelter, finding the church's facilities and food much better than anywhere else. The numbers continued to grow. They were beginning to exhaust their workers. They were up to 60 homeless people a night to feed and house. And one night, the church office was broken into and things taken. The next night, there was a knifing in one of the restrooms of the church.

A year after they had begun their work, the church quit. Locked up the church. They decided to send a yearly cash contribution to the city homeless shelter. The pastor admitted defeat: "If the problem of homelessness were easily solved, it would have been solved by now. We meant well, but we just weren't able to persist with our efforts over the long haul."

It's too bad Jesus didn't just ask us to have a positive attitude toward our neighbors in need, but He commanded us to take care of one another – especially those who are poor, hurting, lost. Too bad Jesus didn't just ask us to take up an occasional collection to show our sympathy for their plight. But He told this story about a persistent woman seeking justice. We wonder how many good deeds go undone, how many good intentions are unfulfilled, not because people do not mean well, but that their good intentions are not wedded with dogged persistence.

So we come here week after week, to be both challenged and blessed, to deepen our prayer, to learn persistence – and to widen our hearts to those around us in need. And we need to keep coming and praying and trying until we no longer have a list of exceptions as to who we should help and include– the illegal, those on welfare, people we don't like, gay or transgender people, liberals, conservatives, anyone who disagrees with us. Being faithful in prayer and persistent in our pursuit of justice, we will one day realize that it's paying off. We will find ourselves with a softer heart. We are less judgmental. More generous. More loving. More forgiving. More inclusive. More like Christ. Keep on, keeping on. Amen. (last 2 points adapted from Willimon, IBID, p. 10-11)